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PD Editorial: If Santa Rosa must have election districts, let's do it right



THE EDITORIAL BOARD

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD | November 12, 2017



The fires of early October have altered the landscape of Santa Rosa in devastating and lasting ways. But these are not the only map changes that are underway.

For reasons largely beyond the control of the Santa Rosa City Council and the Santa Rosa school board, both agencies in the coming months will be making dramatic alterations to how voters elect their local representatives.

Up to now, the seven members of the City Council and school board have been elected at-large, meaning all registered voters within the city and school district have been able to cast votes for all seven seats. But under working plans in both districts, come next year, residents instead will be voting in one of seven districts for both agencies.



Although city voters rejected, by a 60-40 margin, the idea of district elections in 2012, the City Council and school board are moving forward with adopting them anyway under threat of a lawsuit. A Malibu attorney claims the election systems have created “racially polarized voting” as defined by the California Voting Rights Act. In particular, the attorney claims that the systems have not given Latino voters fair representation given that Latinos now represent roughly 30 percent of the city’s population.

We have long supported the need for broader geographic and demographic representation on local governing boards. But we have opposed the idea of district elections as being too blunt an instrument for accomplishing this objective. It’s a solution that limits public involvement in local races from three or four votes every two years to just one vote every four years.

Moreover, we believe that the last thing the community needs at this time is the kind of political

upheaval that could force current elected officials — who by and large have done an exemplary job in responding to this crisis — to compete against one another to maintain their seats while leaving some sections of the city or school district without representation for the next two years.

A committee of representatives from the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce and the Sonoma County Alliance have drafted a proposal for the City Council that incorporates many of these concerns and includes a map of districts that deserves consideration as an interim solution. The map divides up the city in a way that would not have any incumbent council members competing against each other in next year's election, would leave no area "orphaned" and would ensure that downtown as well



as the burned sections of town, particularly Coffey Park and Fountaingrove, are represented by more than a single individual. Such a configuration makes all the more sense given that whatever districts are drawn within the next year would have to be redrawn following the 2020 Census anyway.

The Santa Rosa City Schools District would have benefited from following similar principles. However, district officials have already drawn three proposed maps and will be seeking public feedback during a series of community meetings starting on Nov. 29. Unfortunately, all three of the scenarios would result in existing school board members competing against each other and would leave one to two "trustee areas" without representation until 2020. In scenario No. 1, for example, Frank Pugh and Ed Sheffield would be going head to head in a slice of town that stretches from downtown to Kenwood. Laurie Fong and Jenni Klose would be competing for a seat in Rincon Valley while school board members Evelyn Anderson and Bill Carle, both of whom lost their homes in the fires, would be left to compete against each other for a Mark West/Fountaingrove seat. We can do better than this.

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Santa Rosa can ill afford this kind of political upheaval and conflict as it recovers from the most devastating wildfire in state history. If this must be done, let's at least do it in a way that makes sense and causes as little disruption as possible. We've already had more than enough of that.



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